

# DICTIONARY OF MIKMAK

**Alice in Wonderland Syndrome** See Micropsia and Macropsia

**Body** The exhibition includes forms relating to bodies of plants, animals and people. In no cases are they the idealised bodies of traditional art, or the ‘perfect’ bodies of contemporary mass culture. They are boneless agglomerations of flesh, skin, hair, organs. They are vulnerable, lumpen, disordered – yet they also seem to bulge, grow and proliferate.

**Corset** Chelsea Farquhar’s lime green corset turns its back to most of the exhibition, a billowing, voluptuous torso-like shape of bright pink silk flowing out from it. The whole reminds one visitor of a legless octopus, and another of a witch’s hat – aberrant forms. In this work, as in other elements of her wide-ranging practice, Farquhar explores gendered embodiment, performance and costume, here crafting a vision of identity subject to both unbearable constraints and barely-controlled flux. See also Micropsia and Macropsia.

**Cushion** A sturdy fabric envelope filled with soft stuffing, typically used as a bolster or support. From the Old French *cuissin*. A number of works here appear cushiony, and one of Meuwissen’s is in fact, an elaborately-beaded cushion. Should the art of the post-pandemic era be cushiony – soft, tactile, comforting? Does it register a desire for a quiet, neutral, safe space where we can affirm and centre our feelings and identities – a desire for respite from a world that is overstimulating, unmanageable and impossibly antagonistic?

**Embryo** Arranged inside, around and atop Simone Kennedy’s twenty-six wall-hung boxes are soft shapes, reminiscent of six-month old human or animal embryos. Their small bodies are variously decorated with cluttered beads, pearls, shells, sequins, thread, and the like. Around each an umbilical cord wraps and tucks around, and an accompanying small pouch suggests a petri dish or a womb-like seashell that can seal each into their own protective world. The twenty-six babies/bodies/creatures are each given their own name and date of birth, drawn from the archives of Adelaide’s Lying-in Home at the old Destitute Asylum – now the Migration Museum – where destitute women who found themselves pregnant could seek refuge to birth and give up their child for adoption.

**Flying Spaghetti Monster** *Bathypphysa conifera*, also known as the **Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM)**, is in fact comprised of two kinds of organisms. The top part is a jellyfish, and hanging from its tentacles is a colony of sac-like, tentacled polyps. Altogether, the horrifying, mishmash form of the FSM can be some metres long. Michael Kutschbach reimagines the FSM, in a beguiling otherworldly multimedia sculptural form that toys with formlessness and the grotesque. To my mind, Kutschbach’s sculpture also suggests the kind of alien landscape that appeared in old television series such as *Classic Dr Who* and *Lost in Space*. There, in my memory at least, are same the strangely coloured and structured growths and sprouting forms that stand in for vegetation, the same improbably coloured and formed geology, and the same nameless oozes and ‘bubble’ globes. Searching on the internet for images that match these memories sadly produces only rather tamer examples. See also *Magic Cave*.



Lost in Space, CBS, 1965–68.

**Immured** To be immured is to be sealed up or buried in a wall. Simone Kennedy was immured within the gallery's freestanding wall during the exhibition opening. She performed a spoken word composition, Maureen, her voice resonating within the wall and throughout the gallery space. At one end of the wall are two circular holes, both embellished with textile materials, and through one of which Kennedy spoke. The reading was recorded, and the recording will play through a speaker in the wall during the run of the exhibition.

**Kitsch** "Kitsch" is a word first used by cognoscenti, critics and snobs in the nineteenth century to label commercially-minded, cheap derivatives of high culture marketed to new members of the middle class. Accordingly, the word lends itself to being said with a sneer of disgust or contempt. Since then it has been adopted into widespread parlance, where its users have discovered that it can be said with a smile – and without critical implication – to denote colourful, cheerful and popular mass art. (Take that, Adorno!) Are the lurid colours, outré forms, and opulent-seeming materials of MIKMAK kitsch, or kitschy, or about kitsch? Doubtless, they are all of those things. See also Magic Cave and Necklace.

**Magic Cave** Isn't MIKMAK just a little like the Magic Cave, a kitschy, but lovingly handcrafted and otherworldly children's Christmas attraction, hosted since 1896 by Adelaide department stores John Martin's and then David Jones. Both sites are barely a stone's throw from TLMs home in Regent Arcade.

**Mask** Louise Meuwissens' mask gives its wearer a tentacled face. It is reminiscent of horror writer H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu: "a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers". That, in turn, seems to have inspired the squid-headed Mind Flayers of classic role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons. At the same time, Meuwissen's mask recalls the masks of Mexican wrestlers. Also, we can't help but think it has a somewhat BDSM-gimpish aspect – but maybe that's just us.



David C. Sutherland III, Mind Flayer, Advanced Dungeons & Dragons role playing game, 1977.

**Micropsia and Macropsia** A pair of neurological conditions affecting perception. For those who experience micropsia, objects appear diminished in size (or, the subject experiences their body as having grown), while in macropsia, objects appear magnified (or, the subject experiences their body as having shrunk). The conditions are also known as Alice in Wonderland Syndrome. MIKMAK draws inspiration from the curator, Eleen Deprez's, own experiences of micropsia and macropsia, incorporating works that question scale. These include Louise Meuwissen's giant worm, Simone Kennedy's outsize soft sculptures of the life stages of a fly, and Chris de Rosa's and Michael Kutschbach's both magnified undersea menageries. Perhaps these magnified forms could function as props in a game of make-believe, in which you have been shrunk down, Fantastic Voyage style, and have to negotiate your way through a newly dangerous world. On the other hand, Chris de Rosa also presents weirdly tiny desiccated prickly pear pads, that look like they have had a sci-fi "shrink ray" turned on them. And Chelsea Farquhar's fabric form is by turns bulging and compressed

under the strain of its corset. The latter sums up most fully the implications of these plays with scale – suggesting an unsettling, phantasmagoria in which not only the world, but one’s own body, identity and self are shown as labile and provisional, in a permanent state of woozy becoming.



John Tenniel, illustration from Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865.

**Mikmak** A Dutch word similar in meaning to the English mishmash. In the context of this exhibition, it also operates as an abbreviation of micropsia-macropsia, a pair of neurological conditions affecting perception. As an exhibition, MIKMAK presents sculptural and multi-media works that represent objects and bodily forms distorted, magnified, combined and transformed into wildly-coloured, textured, opulent and glittering forms. MIKMAK lays out an unsettling, phantasmagorical aesthetic in which body, identity and self are shown as labile and provisional, in a permanent state of becoming.

**Nature** In 17th and 18th century European thought, as dualistic and religious attitudes began to slowly recede among the intelligentsia, the natural world began to be identified as the “really real”, and given value – metaphysical, moral and aesthetic – in its own right. In the 1950s, Marjorie Hope Nicolson wrote about this transformation in European aesthetics, showing how the attitudes previously reserved for the divine and spiritual came to be directed at the contents of the natural world. “Awe, compounded of mingled terror and exaltation, once reserved for God, passed over in the 17th century first to an expanded cosmos, then ... to the greatest objects in the geocosm – mountains, ocean, desert.” We often mistake this encultured, romanticised attitude to nature as itself natural – an innate part of our identities that justifies an entitlement to nature in some idealised “pure” form. “Being in nature feels good... we know it intuitively.” ([naturefestival.org.au](http://naturefestival.org.au), original italics) The weird sludge, formless gloopy bodies, pests and parasites of MIKMAK gives the lie to this romantic view. See also Worm.

**Necklace** Louise Meuwissen has strung together about fifty necklaces she has collected over many years, together making a single, huge necklace. Each component necklace, in its own way, is kitsch – 70s hippy kitsch, 80s glitzy-glam power kitsch, 90s Phoebe-from-Friends kooky kitsch... together they form a gigantic string of cultural ejecta and effluvia. Meuwissen can date and classify them better than us, and she does so with care and understanding, connecting one to the other according to likeness of materials. At TLM they hang like a canopy over my desk. I stop typing for a moment, and look up. They remind me of the entrails hanging in Francis Bacon’s *Painting* 1946. I recall Diderot’s words, “Man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.” Woo, that’s fightin’ talk, I think to myself – shaking my head I keep typing.

**Obsession** It will be apparent that some works in the exhibition are made obsessively. There is the collecting/hoarding of necklaces by Louise Meuwissen, and the intricate almost manic decorating and embellishment of both Meuwissen and Simone Kennedy. In these works, this concentration is put to powerful ends, concentrating the viewer’s attention in a way that mimics the artists’, and leaving a powerful psychic impression.

**Opulence** This was a key term curator Eleen Deprez’s initial thinking about the exhibition, which she drew from philosopher and YouTuber Natalie Wynn’s video essay on opulence. Opulence can be defined as an excessive, showy luxury. The opulence of MIKMAK is excessive and perhaps showy in a certain sense, but it could never be mistaken for luxury. While much here is intricately crafted, and even adorned, it is visibly made from cheap materials. So it is a kind of opulent arte povera. See also Kitsch.

**Prickly pear** In the early parts of the 20th century, prickly pears, introduced from South America, took over whole ecosystems in Australia, until other introduced species, cochineal insects, were able to bring them under control. Dried into grotesquely shrunken forms in Chris de Rosa’s work, she has mended and strengthened the desiccated forms with gluey wax. Compared to the burgeoning forms of much else in MIKMAK, they suggest a view through the wrong end of the telescope, unnaturally tiny, spiny and uncanny.

**Rococo** A style of art, architecture and design of mid-eighteenth-century Europe. It means “little Baroque”. Its elaborate, dynamic, curving forms, and opulent sense of ornament are regarded as an antithesis of classicism’s comparatively calm, sober sense of form. The rococo can also be seen as a whimsical, mannered, and decadent version of its more serious predecessor, the Baroque, which dominated Europe in the seventeenth century. Is MIKMAK

a kind of contemporary rococo? It presents organic, excessive and exuberant forms proliferating through the “white cube” gallery space of TLM. As Rococo is antithetical to the classical style, so MIKMAK exemplifies a similar polarity of artistic form, opposed to the geometry, calm and “cool” of much modern and contemporary art.



Rococo interior at the Nymphenburg Palace, Munich.

**Worm** A worm, Bataille says, is “a tube with two orifices”. He points out that more highly developed animals, including ourselves, can also be described this way, for we are merely an elaboration of this basic form. Around one orifice has developed an agglomeration of nerves and receptors – the brain and various sensory organs – and around the other has come to develop the generative organs. Louise Meuwissen’s wormlike Parasite rises up in the TLM window. It has the disquieting scale and vertical attitude of a person, and its silken, beaded textile body – part Dune sandworm and part Priscilla, queen of the desert – confronts and enthralls the passers-by of the Regent Arcade with a reflection of their own fundamental nature.

– Michael Newall, May 2024

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